

## **03.22.1971 by cedawkes**

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**Summary:**

there's a card tacked up on will's bulletin board -- it's been there since he was eleven. || a brief vignette about will byers and the men in his life.

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### Author's Note:

this was inspired by the corner of a "i forgot your birthday" card that can be seen on will's bulletin board in 2.04, under the "will the wise" drawing. i made a lot of assumptions (because lonnie is a shit dad lol) and let my desire for a will-and-hopper father-son relationship run wild, because my son deserves all the positive loving relationships!! in the world!!!!

There's a card tacked up on Will's bulletin board --

(and he's not stupid; he knows that having a father isn't a guarantee, Lucas has one and Max has one and a stepdad and Mike has one even if he might as well not and Dustin's has been dead and gone for as long as anyone can remember and even Eleven had one she can still see sometimes, when her big eyes go glassy and her breath gets quick and nobody but Will seems to see)

-- that's been there since he was eleven. It's half-buried under other things, drawings he's done, a social studies paper that got an A. But the card stays, garish and cartoony, a fifty-cent thing from a corner drugstore. Will knows exactly what it looks like, has spent hours staring at it, trying to pull meaning from it that doesn't exist. There's a sad-faced cartoon kid on the front, holding up a sign that says "SORRY" in big block letters. Over this, it's printed "I forgot your birthday!"

Obviously, of course. It had shown up in mid-April, had been sitting on Will's bed when he got home from school. The return address said "Indianapolis" and Will hadn't been able to help himself, he'd torn it open with shaking hands, heart pounding in excitement, overcome by that sudden, acute wanting that he hadn't felt since he was eight. The card says "Happy Belated Birthday!" on the inside, and underneath it, three printed letters: Dad.

That was it. No message, no gift, "not even a damn five dollar bill, I

mean jesus christ, Lonnie” Joyce had hissed later into the phone when she thought Will was asleep. If it weren’t for the timing and the return address, Will might not have even known who it was from. It could’ve been from the dentist, except the dentist card -- combination birthday and “you are due for a routine cleaning” -- had been on time.

“You don’t have to keep it,” Jonathan had said, hands folded loosely, sitting on Will’s bed and watching his younger brother rearrange the drawings pinned to the bulletin board. “You can totally throw it away. Mom won’t care. And he won’t even know, not like he visits anyway.”

In the face of that bitterness, all Will could do was laugh, faintly, pressing the thumbtacks into the corners of the card. “It’s okay. At least he sent something, right?” His voice had been careless, belied by how his hand lingered on the card for a moment after tacking it in place.

For the first couple months after it arrived, Will would sometimes take it down, open it, look inside and try to imagine a message there. Something personalized, something that explained why Lonnie had forgotten. His imagination would run wild, creating all sorts of hijinks and adventures, elephant stampedes and evil wizards and tsunamis that prevented his dad from calling or writing or visiting on the day itself. Other times he would just remember.

His tenth birthday, they’d gone to a baseball game. Will had dropped his soda, gotten it all over his dad’s feet and Lonnie had yelled at him right there, right where anyone could see. His ninth, it had been a tense dinner, him and Jonathan, whose birthday wasn’t even until July, but who had insisted on coming along -- back when Lonnie and Joyce had tried visitation rights, alternate weekends at the dingy apartment along the highway where Lonnie had lived before moving to Indianapolis. All the birthdays before then, Lonnie had been present, a looming force in the house, his potential irritation and harsh words undercutting Joyce’s brave attempts at making the day special for Will.

Twelve, another forgotten baseball game (but a mixtape, a shared experience with Jonathan that almost drowned out the fighting, the

accusations, the truth that Joyce kept unintentionally telling, *you never cared about him, you never did!*). Thirteen was also a couple weeks late, a phone call, excuses about why Lonnie hadn't visited him in the hospital, about why he'd been so quick to accept Will's death. "Your mom wouldn't let me come, y'know?" Lonnie had said, the bitterness in his voice turning it into a weapon against Joyce, like she was the cruel, heartless mother keeping him from his beloved child, wasting away in the hospital.

Will didn't say anything. He didn't say that he was glad Lonnie wasn't there, that he had been so weak and exhausted and scared that the sight of his father would've just made everything worse. He didn't say that even the phone call had him shaky and quiet for hours afterwards, spiraling down into that dark place that looked and felt like the Upside-Down again. There's a voice that sounds like the Mindflayer (Will doesn't know it then, doesn't recognize His voice yet), whispering, *he didn't want to come, he didn't care, he never did, he doesn't care about you, it's your fault he left, it's your fault he's gone.*

Bob would've remembered. He only had to hear things once to retain them, he remembered Joyce's favorite flowers and Jonathan's least favorite dinners and he remembered how Will went tense and quiet when people moved too close to him. Bob moved carefully around Will, no sudden movements, no abrupt loudness, but he wasn't *blatant* about it. It seemed so natural, even with all the goofiness, the dorkiness to cover it up. Bob never treated Will *differently*.

Bob was gone, though (*your fault, your fault* too hissed the Mindflayer), and as March 22nd 1985 approached, Will found himself wondering how long it would take Lonnie to call or write this time, if maybe he'd forget altogether. He had his friends, had Dustin poorly keeping the surprise party a secret and Lucas and Max asking endless "casual" questions about what sort of decorations he liked and Eleven asking him about his past birthdays and Mike practically tackling him to keep from peeking in the blanket fort (a dumb place to hide presents, but whatever). Will had his family and their familiar rituals -- Joyce would make dinner, wouldn't point out the fact that there wasn't a single green veggie on the table, Jonathan would make another part of his mixtape saga and explain every song and its meaning to Will. Will had *so much* to look forward to, but he still

woke up on March 22nd with a pit in his stomach, wondering.

After a (definitely unhealthy; Eleven put a truly horrendous amount of syrup all over *everything*) breakfast with his family and El and Hopper, who were over more often than not these days, Will tugged himself up and into Hopper's truck. The cop had delayed going into work so he could drive Will to school, which was also happening more commonly as the weeks went on. Usually they stayed quiet, listening to the radio, or Hopper would gruffly ask about "those rotten kids you hang out with" and smirk as Will recounted the party's latest exploits.

But today, after pulling out of the driveway and onto the winding road through the trees, Hopper cleared his throat awkwardly, digging in the pocket of his coat for a moment. "Hey, gotcha somethin'," he mumbled, pulling out a clumsily wrapped, smallish package and tossing it into Will's lap.

Quietly stunned, the boy tossed Hopper a quick sideways look, trying to figure out if he was kidding. But the man kept his eyes on the road, drumming his fingers on the wheel. He seemed almost...anxious, actually. Slowly, Will peeled off the wrapping paper, wadding it up carefully as he turned over the slim, metal container, reading the label.

"It's..." he began in a faint, wonderstruck voice.

Hopper cleared his throat again, looking at Will, then quickly away. "Guy at the store said they were called "graphite" or somethin'. Said all the real artists got fancy pencils like that. You do just fine with regular ones, but...I dunno. Figured you could add them to that bigass box you got on your desk."

It wasn't the fact that they were pencils -- nice ones, sharp and sleek and expensive-looking. It was the fact of them. It was the fact that they were wrapped, they were chosen, they were *planned for*. Hopper had gone to an art store, had asked about what to get, ahead of time. He'd remembered. "You remembered," Will said, fingers trembling a little on the pencils. Hopper wasn't looking at him, was watching the road, but Will couldn't look away. There was a tug of that wanting in his chest again, but it wasn't longing for Lonnie, for the father who

made him scared, who moved too quick and grabbed his arm and shook him and screamed in the parking lot, who called him things that rang in his head for hours, weeks, years afterwards.

It was a longing for something else, *someone else*, someone Will was realizing he might already *have*. “You remembered my birthday,” he said again, aware his eyes were stinging, his throat was tight.

Hopper saved him having to be embarrassed, reached over carefully and ruffled his hair, big hand resting for a moment, warm and heavy on the back of Will’s head. “Course I did,” was all he said, smiling quick and fond.

Will takes down the old belated-birthday card the next day and sticks it in a desk drawer (he’s not ready to throw it away, not yet, maybe not ever, but he’s ready to stop looking at it and wishing). Instead he tacks up the first drawing he did with the graphite pencils, smudgy and shadowy, a majestic dragon draped over a hoard of glittering gold, sleeping peacefully and unaware of the brave knight sneaking in to make off with the treasure. The knight may or may not have a familiar mustache and hat, but Will’s not telling anyone who it’s inspired by.